Hey, What's Your Sign?

A rural HIVer courts prevention politics with a drive-by personal ad

February 1, 2005 By Nick Burns

When small-town HIVer Tom Donohue, 25, plastered his baby-faced mug between state-lottery and local beer ads on an 11-foot-high roadside billboard, he half-expected hate mail from local Pennsylvania yokels. But imagine his shock when the single poison-pen missive came from a nearby small AIDS service organization. What's wrong with this picture?

Driven by a 2003 Penn State University (PSU) study finding that only 25 percent of students regularly used condoms, the former PSU student brainstormed a billboard that could detour drivers—especially those commuting between PSU, nearby Lock Haven University and the city of Williamsport—to testing resources listed on his own website, www.whospositive.com. He snagged university and big pharma funds to tower above Route 220, a busy central-PA highway, throughout November 2004. His controversial message? "My name's Tom: 25 years old, HIV positive and in your neighborhood…just like HIV. Have you been tested lately?"

"[The sign] plainly says you can't judge someone's status based on their appearance," says the clean-cut, preppie Donohue, who began trafficking in HIV activism after testing positive in October 2003. Two months later, he launched his own educational nonprofit, Who's Positive, which sends him to U.S. high schools and colleges. "The billboard was meant to reach students and residents in surrounding communities," Donohue explains.

But instead of a local show of solidarity, Brian Bluth, president of AIDS Resource Alliance, a service organization in nearby Williamsport, e-mailed a scathing criticism to Donohue shortly after his poster debuted. "We see the billboard as an attempt to scare people into getting tested," Bluth reiterated to POZ. "For people uneducated about HIV, the billboard may suggest that HIV is transmitted through casual contact. It lacks any educational info about HIV transmission." As Bluth sees it, since 78 percent of the ASO's clients are African American—half of whom are women infected through hetero sex and drug use—Donohue, a gay white man, can't represent local HIVers.

"There's no scare tactic behind my message," responds Donohue, who once volunteered at AIDS Resource in 2002. "It's a simple testing reminder meant to be taken at face value. I'm just one of many HIVers in the community." Donohue has also been inundated with encouraging responses, including one from a Lock Haven resident who wrote: "I'm glad somebody has the courage to put

this out there. You are a hero!”

Tacky tactics or not, Susan Kennedy, associate director at PSU Health Services, says that a week after the sign went up, two students who sought testing mentioned the billboard. “Having Tom’s face up there makes a profound impact,” she says. Williamsport HIVer Eric Kelly agrees. “There’s a lot of stigma around the colleges—nobody talks about HIV.”

The controversy seems to fuel Donohue. He’s applying for grants to continue his workshop and set up a 24-hour youth HIV hotline. Though his ad came down December 1, he wants to splash other HIVers on billboards in their own neighborhoods. “Ideally, future signs will include people of different ethnic backgrounds,” he says carefully, “to emphasize my bottom line: HIV doesn’t discriminate.”

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